

Why vitakka might mean ‘thinking’ in jhana

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This article is set to be a comment on Bhante Sujato’s article [Why vitakka doesn’t mean ‘thinking’ in jhana](#). I mean no disrespect to the author. I will simply explain why I have found the arguments presented in that article unconvincing.

The title of Bhante’s article is quite self-explanatory. Nonetheless, his introduction is worth quoting:

*« Here’s one of the most often contested issues in Buddhist meditation: can you be thinking while in jhana? We normally think of jhana as a profound state of higher consciousness; yet the standard formula for first jhana says it is a state with ‘vitakka and vicara’. Normally these words mean ‘thinking’ and ‘exploring’, and that is how Bhikkhu Bodhi translates them in jhana, too. This has lead many meditators to believe that in the first jhana one can still be thinking. **This is a mistake**, and here’s why. »*

Then, Bhante explains why he will first present general arguments that in his opinion prove his point:

« Actually, right now I’m interested in a somewhat subtle linguistic approach to this question. But I’ve found that if you use a complex analysis of a problem, some people, understandably enough, don’t have time or interest to follow it through; and often we tend to assume that if a complex argument is just a sign of sophistry and lack of real evidence. So first up I’ll present the more straightforward reasons why vitakka/vicara don’t mean thinking in jhana, based on the texts and on experience. Then I’ll get into the more subtle question of why this mistake gets made.

For most of this article I’ll just mention vitakka, and you can assume that the analysis for vicara follows similar lines. »

Bhante then turns to what he considers as evidence from the suttas:

MN 19

« The primary source work is the [Dvedhavitakka Sutta](#) (MN 19). This is where the Buddha talks in most detail about vitakka specifically, and describes how he discovered and developed it as part of the ‘right thought’ (sammāsankappa) of the eightfold path. Note that the terms sankappa and vitakka are often, as here, synonyms.

The Buddha describes how he noticed that thinking unwholesome thoughts leads to suffering, while thinking wholesome thoughts leads to happiness. And he further realized that he could think wholesome thoughts nonstop all day and night, which would not lead to anything bad; **but by so doing he could not make his mind still in samadhi. So by abandoning even wholesome thoughts he was able to enter on the four jhanas.** »

I think it is good to go back directly to the source:

“tassa mayhaṃ, bhikkhave, evaṃ appamattassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato uppajjati nekkhammavitakko... abyāpādavitakko... avihimsāvitakko. so evaṃ pajānāmi: ‘uppanno kho me ayaṃ avihimsāvitakko. so ca kho nevattabyābādhāya saṃvattati, na parabyābādhāya saṃvattati, na ubhayabyābādhāya saṃvattati, paññāvuddhiko avighātapakkhiko nibbānasamvattaniko’. rattiṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. divasaṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. rattindivaṃ cepi naṃ, bhikkhave, anuvitakkeyyaṃ anuvicāreyyaṃ, neva tatonidānaṃ bhayaṃ samanupassāmi. api ca kho **me aticiraṃ** anuvitakkayato anuvicārayato kāyo kilameyya. kāye kilante cittaṃ ūhaññeyya. ūhate citte ārā cittaṃ samādhimhāti. so kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, ajjhattameva cittaṃ saṅṭhapemi, sannisādemi, ekodiṃ karomi samādahāmi. taṃ kissa hetu? ‘mā me cittaṃ ūhaññī’ti. »

« And as I remained thus heedful, ardent, & resolute, thinking imbued with renunciation... with non-ill will... with harmlessness arose in me. I discerned that ‘Thinking imbued with harmlessness has arisen in me; and that leads neither to my own affliction, nor to the affliction of others, nor to the affliction of

*both. It fosters discernment, promotes lack of vexation, & leads to Unbinding. If I were to think & ponder in line with that even for a night... even for a day... even for a day & night, I do not envision any danger that would come from it, except that **thinking & pondering a long time would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed; and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.**’ So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, & concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed. »*

So here is what the sutta says, precisely:

aticiraṃ anuvitakketi anuvicāreti >> kāyo kilamati >> cittaṃ ūhaññati >> ārā
cittaṃ samādhimhā

thinking and pondering for a long time >> the body is tired >> the mind is
disturbed >> the mind is away/far from concentration

Does this sutta say that thinking has to be stopped before entering the first jhana? Obviously not.

What it does clearly say is this:

1. Even when the Buddha speaks of concentration, he uses the word ‘vitakka’ and its derivatives (here the verb ‘vitakketi’) in the sense of ‘thinking’.
2. ‘Thinking’ for « a long time » (**aticiraṃ** could be more accurately translated by « an excessively [ati-] long time [cira] »), will tire the body and render concentration impossible.

Is this passage compatible with the idea that ‘vitakka’ would mean something else than ‘thinking’ in jhana, and that actually there would be no ‘vitakka’ (in the usual sense of ‘thought’) in the first jhana? Well, it certainly seems so to some. But then again, ‘vitakka’ is used in its usual sense of ‘thought’ even in the context of samadhi practice, such as in this very passage of MN 19 as well as in the subsequent AN 3.101, and yet in that same context of samadhi practice, there would be no ‘vitakka’ in the sense of ‘thought’. In short, even in the context of samadhi practice we see that ‘vitakka’=‘thought’ and yet, if Bhante Sujato is correct, in the first jhana we would have ‘vitakka’ but ‘thoughts’ would be absent.

That does not make any sense to me, and as a math teacher I would consider this a gross pedagogic mistake. I am quite convinced from my overall experience with the suttas that the Buddha mastered the art of pedagogy, and therefore I am

not inclined to consider he would have made such a confusing mistake.

Now, is this passage incompatible with the idea that ‘vitakka’ could mean ‘thinking’ in the jhana formula? I would dare to say it is not.

As we have noted above, what it says exactly is that « excess » of thinking « for a long time » is detrimental to concentration. That does not mean there cannot be thinking in the first stage of jhana. It could mean however that the first jhana is not to be practiced excessively, or for a too long time. Let us compare here ‘vitakka’ with the expression ‘āraddha·vīriya’ (aroused energy). MN 19 continues and shows that aroused energy is well compatible with the first jhana, or at least that it leads towards it:

“āraddhaṃ kho pana me, bhikkhave, vīriyaṃ ahosi asallīnaṃ, upaṭṭhitā sati asammūṭṭhā, passaddho kāyo asāraddho, samāhitaṃ cittaṃ ekaggaṃ. so kho ahaṃ, bhikkhave, vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja vihāsiṃ. »

« Unflagging persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established. My body was calm & unaroused, my mind concentrated & single. Quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. »

Yet acc·āraddha·vīriya (**ati**+āraddha+vīriya, **excess** of energy) is also detrimental to concentration, as MN 128 states:

« accāraddhavīriyaṃ kho me udapādi, accāraddhavīriyādhikaraṇaṃ pana me samādhi cavi. samādhimhi cute obhāso antaradhāyati dassanaṃ rūpānaṃ. seyyathāpi, anuruddhā, puriso ubhohi hatthehi vaṭṭakaṃ gālhaṃ gaṇheyya: so tattheva patameyya »

« Excess of energy arose in me, and because of excess of energy my concentration fell away. As my composure fell away, the light and the vision of forms disappeared.’ It is as if a man were to seize a quail tightly with both hands: it would die then and there. »

And for that matter, lack of energy (**ati**-līna·vīriya) is also detrimental to concentration, as MN 128 also indicates:

« *atīṇavīriyaṃ kho me udapādi, atīṇavīriyādhikaraṇaṅca pana me samādhicavi. samādhimhi cute obhāso antaradhāyati dassanaṅca rūpānaṃ. seyyathāpi, anuruddhā, puriso vaṭṭakaṃ sithilaṃ gaṇheyya, so tassa hatthato uppateyya* »

« *Lack of energy* arose in me, and because of lack of energy my *composure fell away*. As my composure fell away, the light and the vision of forms disappeared.’ It is as if a man were to seize a quail loosely: it would fly off from his hands. »

So I would conclude here that this argument based on MN 19 appears unconvincing to me, insofar as saying that excess of something is detrimental to attaining a certain state is not to be conflated with saying that this thing prevents per se the attainment of that state, and that therefore it cannot be present in it. It can very well be one prominent component of it, that is usually present in a moderate way, even though it would be better if it weren’t there at all. Not unlike processed sugar in food: even though it would be better to have food without processed sugar, a little bit of it doesn’t make food uneatable, whereas too much processed sugar does.

Now there might be another way in which one might try to say that MN 19 would prove that ‘thinking’ has to be abandoned before entering jhana, but I’ll only mention it briefly because it stands even less to analysis: it would be to consider that MN 19 progresses linearly, in such a way that the states described later are always more refined than the ones described earlier; then, since the sutta speaks first of ending thoughts and only later on of entering jhana, it should mean that the former has to come before the latter in actual practice, and that there could not be ‘thinking’ in jhana.

Such an assumption would obviously be erroneous. Indeed, MN 19 speaks first of absence of disturbance, of stilling thoughts and of concentration:

« *thinking & pondering a long time would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed; and a disturbed mind is far from concentration.*’ So I steadied my mind right within, settled, unified, & concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind would not be disturbed. »

But then, in the next paragraph, it goes back to speaking again about thinking:

« *Whatever a monk keeps pursuing with his thinking & pondering, that becomes the inclination of his awareness. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with renunciation, abandoning thinking imbued with sensuality, his mind is bent by*

that thinking imbued with renunciation. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with non-ill will, abandoning thinking imbued with ill will, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with non-ill will. If a monk keeps pursuing thinking imbued with harmlessness, abandoning thinking imbued with harmfulness, his mind is bent by that thinking imbued with harmlessness. »

Which clearly indicates a not-so-linear exposition. And later on, after concluding on its cowherd simile, it goes into the jhana formulas:

« Unflagging persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established. My body was calm & unaroused, my mind concentrated & single. Quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation etc. »

Remark: [\[1\]](#)

AN 3.101

Let's now turn to the next argument mentioned in Bhante Sujato's article:

« A similar situation is described in [AN 3.101](#). There, the Buddha speaks of a meditator who abandons successively more refined forms of thought, until all that is left are 'thoughts on the Dhamma' (*dhammavitakka*). Even these most subtle of thoughts prevent one from realizing the true peace of samadhi, so they must be abandoned.

Clearly, then, the right thought of the eightfold path, even thoughts of the Dhamma itself, must be abandoned before one can enter jhana. »

So, again, it is worth examining what the sutta says, exactly:

santi adhiccittamanuyuttassa bhikkhuno majjhimasahagatā upakkilesā:
kāma**vitakko** byāpāda**vitakko** vihiṃsā**vitakko**. tamenam sacetaso bhikkhu
dabbajātiko pajahati vinodeti byantīkaroti anabhāvaṃ gameti. tasmim pahīne
tasmim byantīkate santi adhiccittamanuyuttassa bhikkhuno sukhumasahagatā
upakkilesā: ñāti**vitakko** janapada**vitakko** anavaññattipaṭisaṃyutto **vitakko**.
tamenam sacetaso bhikkhu dabbajātiko pajahati vinodeti byantīkaroti

anabhāvaṃ gameti.

there remain in [a monk intent on heightened mind, (my correction)] the moderate impurities: **thoughts** of sensuality, [**thoughts** of] ill will, & [**thoughts** of] harmfulness. These he abandons, dispels, wipes out of existence. When he is rid of them there remain in [a monk intent on heightened mind] the fine impurities: **thoughts** of his caste, **thoughts** of his home district, **thoughts** related to not wanting to be despised. These he abandons, dispels, wipes out of existence.

tasmim pahīne tasmim byantīkate athāparaṃ dhammavitakkāvasissati. **so hoti samādhi na ceva santo na ca pañīto** nappaṭippassaddhaladdho **na ekodibhāvādhigato** sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritagato hoti. so, bhikkhave, samayo yaṃ taṃ cittaṃ ajjhattaṃyeva santiṭṭhati sannisīdati ekodi hoti samādhīyati. so hoti samādhi santo pañīto paṭippassaddhiladdho **ekodibhāvādhigato** na sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritagato. yassa yassa ca abhiññā sacchikaraṇīyassa dhammassa cittaṃ abhininnāmeti abhiññā sacchikiriyāya tatra tatveva sakkhibhabbatam pāpuṇāti sati satiāyatane. so sace ākaṅkhati: ‘anekavihitam iddhividham paccanubhaveyyam

« When he is rid of them, there remain only **thoughts** of the Dhamma. **His concentration is neither calm nor refined**, it has not yet attained serenity, **[not yet reached] unity**, and is kept in place by the fabrication of forceful restraint. But there comes a time when his mind grows steady inwardly, settles down, grows unified & concentrated. His concentration is calm & refined, has attained serenity & **[reached] unity**, and is no longer kept in place by the fabrication of forceful restraint. And then whichever of the higher knowledges he turns his mind to know & realize, he can witness them for himself whenever there is an opening. If he wants, he wields manifold supranormal powers. »

As we can see here, when the meditator is working with « thoughts of the Dhamma » (dhammavitakka), the text speaks of « his concentration, » that is not calm or refined, and that has « not yet reached unity » (ekodibhāva). This word is very telling, because it comes up in the second jhana formula, as one of its characteristics:

« vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā ajjhattaṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso **ekodibhāvaṃ** avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhījaṃ pītisukhaṃ dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. »

« With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhana: rapture & pleasure born of composure, **unification** of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation — internal assurance. » (Ven. Thanissaro)

So the text looks very much like saying that while the meditator is still having « thoughts of the Dhamma » he already has a certain degree of concentration, that is of quite low quality (which we could in all intellectual honesty consider as likely to be the first jhana), but later on he reaches true unification of the mind (quite arguably a code word for second jhana), and then his concentration is of much higher quality.^[2] Therefore I see little backup for Bhante's claim:

« Clearly, then, the right thought of the eightfold path, even thoughts of the Dhamma itself, must be abandoned before one can enter jhana. »

I would even add that this last statement is also clearly at odds with MN 78, which by the way also supports quite strongly the interpretation that takes ekodibhāva in the above AN 3.101 to refer to the attainment of the second jhana:

« Katame ca, thapati, akusalā saṅkappā? Kāma-saṅkappo, byāpāda-saṅkappo, vihiṃsā-saṅkappo. ... Ime ca, thapati, akusalā saṅkappā kuhiṃ aparisesā nirujjhanti? Nirodhopi nesaṃ vutto: idha, thapati, bhikkhu vivicceva kāmehi vivicca akusalehi dhammehi savitakkaṃ savicāraṃ vivekajaṃ pītisukhaṃ paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. etthete akusalā saṅkappā aparisesā nirujjhanti. »

« And what are unskillful resolves? Being resolved on sensuality, on ill will, on harmfulness. These are called unskillful resolves. ... Now where do unskillful resolves cease without trace? Their cessation, too, has been stated: There is the case where a monk, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, enters & remains in the first jhana: rapture & pleasure born from withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. This is where unskillful resolves cease without trace. »

...

« Katame ca, thapati, kusalā saṅkappā? Nekkhammasaṅkappo, abyāpādasāṅkappo, avihiṃsāsaṅkappo ... Ime ca, thapati, kusalā saṅkappā kuhiṃ aparisesā nirujjhanti? Nirodhopi nesaṃ vutto. Idha, thapati, bhikkhu vitakkavicārānaṃ vūpasamā ajjhataṃ sampasādanaṃ cetaso ekodibhāvaṃ

*avitakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhijaṃ pītisukhaṃ **dutiyaṃ jhānaṃ upasampajja viharati. etthe kusalā saṅkappā aparisesā nirujjhanti.***«

*« And what are skillful resolves? Being resolved on renunciation (freedom from sensuality), on non-ill will, on harmlessness. ... Now where do skillful resolves cease without trace? Their cessation, too, has been stated: There is the case where a monk, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, **enters & remains in the second jhana**: rapture & pleasure born of composure, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation — internal assurance. **This is where skillful resolves cease without trace.** »*

As I have discussed in a [previous article](#), saṅkappa (that Ven Thanissaro here translates as ‘resolves’) can be just synonym of ‘vitakka’ in the sense of ‘thought’, or it can point to something slightly different that I identified as close to ‘aspiration’, a kind of wish that is expressed mentally by a sentence.

So there are skillful saṅkappas in the first jhana, no one can deny it, but then the only way to keep supporting the opinion according to which there are no ‘thoughts’ in the first jhana would be to consider that ‘saṅkappa’, just as ‘vitakka’, suddenly changes its meaning in the jhana context, a meaning that implies actually the opposite of what it would normally convey, and this without any foreshadowing or explanation anywhere in any sutta. The fact that here saṅkappa can be of renunciation, non-ill will or harmlessness makes it clear that the word in this context means something akin to ‘thought’ and cannot have its meaning twisted as in the case of vitakka to purportedly mean ‘application of the mind to the meditation object’. Yet it is clearly said to be present up to the second jhana.

It seems to me in all intellectual honesty and trying to shake off any kind of ‘agenda’ that when we look a little closer at the texts of MN 19 and AN 3.101, and factor in MN 78, the claims made by Bhante not only appear to be inaccurate, but the evidence actually points to the opposite direction.

The little ‘thought’ experiment

Bhante next seeks to prove his point with a little experiment:

« Let me give you a test. Sit quietly, now, for five minutes. Watch your mind, and notice what happens when you think and when you don't think.

Okay, done now? What happened? Well, let me guess: most of the time you were thinking of this or that, but occasionally there were spaces of silence. And those spaces of silence were more peaceful. Even this much, even just a few minutes of sitting quietly, and you can experience the peace of a quiet mind. And yet in jhana you're still thinking? Impossible! »

Since we jump here from premise to conclusion without detailing much of the underlying logic, I will try to elucidate what has been implied in this argumentation. The statement reads as if it meant « anyone can experience occasional spaces of silence within five minutes of sitting for meditation, therefore having a silent mind is a state that is easily attainable by anyone, so if the definition of the first jhana entails that you're still thinking once you have reached it, then a state more advanced than the first jhana is trivially attained in a few minutes by any beginner. Impossible! »

In other words, the idea here is to compare the experience of having « occasional spaces of silence » with the experience of the first jhana, and then conclude that the former cannot be more refined than the latter. But is it really appropriate to compare « occasional spaces of silence » with a jhana state?

Well, each of the jhanas is described in the suttas with the formula « he enters and **remains** in the xxx jhana » (xxx jhānaṃ upasampajja **viharati**). This means that in order to be considered as having attained any jhana, one has to « enter and remain » in that state, which implies that the experience must be stable and stretch for a certain period of time. This type of experience is, temporally speaking, of such different nature from « occasionally experiencing spaces of silence » that it doesn't make sense to compare the two, let alone rank them.

It's a bit like comparing a toddler playing on a trampoline with an airplane pilot preparing to take off on the landing strip and saying, while the latter has just begun his run, before he has even started pulling on the stick, that the toddler takes off and flies higher than him. This is why this argument looks very much like a non sequitur.

« Not to mention jhana, anyone who has been on a meditation retreat will have experienced those blessed moments, sometimes several minutes or longer, when

the mind is clear, still, and silent. Not all the hindrances are gone, and not all the jhana factors may be present, yet there is a degree of stillness. »

Here Bhante suggests that anyone who has been on a meditation retreat has experienced moments when the mind is clear, still and silent, while not all hindrances are gone. Well, then, let's see which hindrance might have been present in a « silent » mind:

- not craving, because it always arises with a distracting object (in other words, due to unwise attention towards a pleasant object)
- not aversion, because the mind cannot be clear, still and silent with aversion
- not doubt, because again it arises with thoughts
- obviously not agitation and worry
- that leaves us with lethargy and sleepiness. But then again, the mind would not be « clear ».

Therefore I have some doubt that the experience Bhante is referring to here is even possible.

What is possible, on the other hand, is that the mind would be still, the hindrances would be largely reduced, but the first jhana would still not kick in, because one is not skilled in inducing pāmojja (serene joy), which is an essential trigger for the first jhana, as described in many suttas (actually, the whole sequence runs as follows: pāmojja > pīti > passaddhi > sukha > samādhī).

« The best he had »

Bhante then turns to his main observation:

« If vitakka does not mean thinking, then why did the Buddha use such a misleading word? The answer is simple: it was the best he had. »

I think it is pretty clear that the Buddha did have other words to designate the concept « application/directing of the mind ». Take for example the expressions

‘*cittaṃ abhininnāmeti*’ (he directs his mind) and ‘*cittaṃ abhinīharati*’ (he inclines his mind) which appears several dozen times in the four Nikayas, generally referring to supra-normal attainments, as for example in DN 2:

“so evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatūpakkilese mudubhūte kammaniye ṭhite āneñjappatte ***ñāṇadassanāya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti***.«

« With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, **he directs and inclines it to knowledge and vision.** »

At SN 47.10, the Buddha recommends directing one’s mind towards a specific meditation object and uses the expression ‘*cittaṃ paṇidahitabbam*’:

« bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharati ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ. tassa kāye kāyānupassino viharato kāyārammaṇo vā uppajjati kāyasmiṃ pariḷāho, cetaso vā līnattaṃ, bahiddhā vā cittaṃ vikkhipati. tenānanda, bhikkhunā kismiñcīdeva pasādanīye nimitte ***cittaṃ paṇidahitabbam***. tassa kismiñcīdeva pasādanīye nimitte cittaṃ paṇidahato pāmojjaṃ jāyati. »

« a monk abides contemplating body as body — ardent, fully aware, mindful — leading away the unhappiness that comes from wanting the things of the world. And for one who is abiding contemplating body as body, a bodily object arises, or bodily distress, or mental sluggishness, that scatters his mind outward. Then the monk **should direct his mind** to some satisfactory image. When the mind is directed to some satisfactory image, happiness is born. »

If in the context of jhana, by saying that ‘vitakka’ is present, the Buddha meant that the mind is directing itself towards the object, while there would be no ‘thoughts’, then he could also have used other much less misleading terms, such as ‘manasikāra’.

So it seems to me there is plenty of evidence to show that the Buddha would have had other much less misleading choices. Which leads us to the conclusion that either he didn’t mean there was no ‘thinking’ in the first jhana, or else he made a rather gross pedagogic mistake that got many of us confused.

The linguistic argument

Bhante now tries to convince the reader that not only ‘vitakka’ has a completely different meaning in the context of jhana, but so do all other words in the formulas. This is probably the least convincing argument in this article.

Bhante first says something with which I would mostly agree:

« The Buddha, in what must have been a striking innovation, used only simple, empirical terms to describe jhana and other states of higher consciousness. In common with his typical empiricist approach, this means that he used words that remained as close as possible to their ordinary meanings. He wanted people to understand these states, to refer to their ordinary consciousness, and to see how that can be developed and transformed to become something wonderful. »

But why, then, would the Buddha have used a word that generally means ‘thought’ to describe a thoughtless state? If I see the word ‘vitakka’ and I « refer to [my] ordinary consciousness » I would tend to interpret it as ‘thought’.

It seems to me that Bhante’s central idea in this article is this:

« If we look closely at the terms in the jhana formula, then, we find that they are words that have a more coarse physical or psychological meaning in everyday language. They are common words that everyone can understand, and can relate to their own experience. And in every single case, they clearly have a more subtle, abstract, evolved meaning in the context of jhana. »

In other words, the idea is to throw the supposed shift in meaning back on all other words. Let’s see how that works out.

« So, for example, the first word in the formula is viveka. This normally means physical seclusion; going away from others into the forest or a solitary spot. In jhana, however, it refers to a mental seclusion, where the mind turns away from the senses and withdraws into itself. The Pali texts make this distinction clear, as elsewhere they speak of three kinds of seclusion: physical, mental (i.e. the jhanas), and seclusion from all attachments (Awakening). »

Yes, the Pali texts make these distinctions clear. This is not the case with

‘vitakka’. But most importantly, that « mental » meaning given to viveka, unlike the purported ‘vitakka’ meaning, appears elsewhere outside the jhana context, for example at AN 3.94:

*“tīṇi kho panimāni, bhikkhave, imasmiṃ dhammavinaye bhikkhuno pavivekāni. katamāni tīṇi? idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu sīlavā ca hoti, dussīlyañcassa pahīnaṃ hoti, tena ca **vivitto** hoti; sammādiṭṭhiko ca hoti, micchādiṭṭhi cassa pahīnā hoti, tāya ca **vivitto** hoti; khīṇāsavo ca hoti, āsavā cassa pahīnā honti, tehi ca **vivitto** hoti. »*

*« In this Dhamma and discipline, bhikkhus, there are these three kinds of **solitude** for a bhikkhu. What three? Here, a bhikkhu is virtuous; he has abandoned immorality and remains secluded from it. He holds right view; he has abandoned wrong view and remains secluded from it. He is one whose taints are destroyed; he has abandoned the taints and remains secluded from them. »*

The word used here is ‘paviveka’, but the meaning is almost the same as ‘viveka’, and the past participle ‘vivitta’ is exactly the same as ‘viviccaeva’ (vivitta+eva) in the first jhana formula. So it is quite clear that ‘vivitta’ doesn’t have in jhana a very special meaning that it wouldn’t have anywhere else, as the claim goes in the case of ‘vitakka’.

Then Bhante goes on in the same fashion with the other words in the formula:

« The next word in the formula is kama. In ordinary language this means the pleasures of life, especially sex, but also food, drink, luxuries, and other pleasures of the senses. In jhana, however, it has a more subtle nuance, referring to the mind that inclines to taking pleasure in any experience through the five senses. »

This refers to a controversial view that is supported by the commentaries/Visuddhimagga: in ordinary contexts, kāma refers to the desire for sense-pleasures, whereas in the Jhāna contexts it would refer to desire for sense-experience (even without craving for its objects), e.g. wanting to see, wanting to hear... Some suttas do mention delight in objects (sights, sounds...), as well as delight in seeing/hearing...-consciousness as obstacles to liberation. However, such desire for sense-experience is not called “kāma” in those suttas, and thus not really fit for the sake of his argument.

« Then there is the word akusala. Normally this means ‘unskilful’, as, for example, someone who is no good at a certain craft. One who is kusala, on the other hand, is clever and adroit. In the jhana formula, however, kusala includes any tendency of the mind that creates suffering. »

The word kusala is used in a great many contexts outside of jhana in that sense. [3] This should actually be an evidence that the claim according to which each word of the formula has a special meaning is false.

« Similarly there is the word dhamma, which is what akusala qualifies. Dhamma in ordinary language has a variety of meanings, such as ‘law’, ‘custom’, and so on. In jhana, however, it takes on a far more subtle meaning, that is, any object, quality, or tendency of the mind. The akusala-dhammas, or ‘unskilful qualities’, especially refer to the five hindrances which must be abandoned before entering jhana. »

Same thing. The word dhamma is used in that sense a great many times outside the jhana context. At this point, the argument should fall flat, in my opinion. But Bhante considers his point made and doubles down:

« Now we can look again at the claim that vitakka must mean thinking in jhana, because that’s what it means in everyday discourse. And I trust that this claim now appears a lot less plausible than it might have earlier. If this is true, then vitakka (& vicara) are the sole exceptions. Every other term in the jhana formula takes everyday words and transforms them, in what the Buddha emphasizes at every turn is a special, exalted, and refined context. Only vitakka is exempt from this, and means exactly the same thing in higher consciousness as it does in lower consciousness. »

From the facts I have mentioned, above, I believe it is quite clear that vitakka would not be the only word having the same meaning inside as outside the jhana formula. It is actually the case with every other word.

I do not pretend to know with certainty what the final word on this issue ought to be. I have simply outlined why I have found this article unconvincing and why I think that with a closer look evidence rather points in the opposite direction.

Remarks:

[1]. In the Chinese parallel version, after the excessive thinking has been subdued, the meditator enters directly into 2nd Jhāna. While we cannot exclude the possibility that this could be a transmission-error, taking the Chinese parallel on full value, this could be interpreted in either of two ways:

1) he overcame not only excessive thinking, but all thinking and therefore went from a pre-Jhānic wholesome state directly into 2nd Jhāna

2) the state of intense/excessive thinking IS 1st Jhāna. But this tires the mind and it would eventually lose 1st Jhāna, wherefore a meditator should make an effort to move on to 2nd Jhāna and not spend too much time in 1st Jhāna.

[2]. The fact that it is mentioned “And then whichever of the higher knowledges he turns his mind to know & realize, he can witness them for himself whenever there is an opening”, indicates that by then he may already have moved on to 4th Jhāna. Only after the 4th Jhana usually the passage with the abhiññas is introduced.

[3]. very often the suttas use “kusala” and “puñña” alongside each other, which shows that kusala often goes beyond mere skilfulness, but also has ethical connotations in the sense of kammic wholesomeness. It is this latter meaning that the term “kusala” very probably has in the context of the 1st Jhāna. This also fits with the definition of the three types of vitakka/sankappa (renunciation, non ill-will, non-cruelty), which are ethically wholesome and not merely skillful or without dukkha.